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Radical Re-envisionings: Ancient Egypt, Afrofuturism, and FKA twigs

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Abstract

Radical Re-envisionings: Ancient Egypt, Afrofuturism, and FKA twigs

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This report considers the role of ancient Egyptian culture and iconography within the genre/aesthetic known as Afrofuturism. It aims to position Afrofuturism at the juncture between alternative and activist media and genre media, highlighting the similar strains of thought and intentions within each body of academic literature, and argues that because genre media and alternative media have comparable goals, Afrofuturism is itself a radical genre/aesthetic. It supports this assertion by discussing the importance of ancient Egypt within Afrofuturism in relation to ancient Egypt's more general cultural significance to the wider North American and European communities. This report concludes with a case study that investigates the use of ancient Egypt by English R&B artist FKA twigs within her music video for her single, "Two Weeks."

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INTRODUCTION

When musical artist FKA twigs made her American late night television debut on *The Tonight Show* with Jimmy Fallon in November of 2014, viewers were unprepared for the visual and auditory performance they were presented with. FKA twigs, a genre-bending artist from Gloucestershire, England who's of Jamaican and Spanish descent, sang "Two Weeks," her first single from her premiere album, *LP1*, while an air sculpture created by Daniel Wurtzell and made up of two sheets of glimmering fabric danced ethereally between three fans behind her as she sang. The effect was ghostly and elegant, two words that could also be used to describe FKA twigs herself. Critical response to the performance was almost universally glowing. *The Huffington Post* considered the performance to be "one for the books" (Goodman); *EntertainThis*, an offshoot of *USA Today*, commented, "Leave it to FKA twigs to kill it on her first time out" (Ryan); *Spin* felt that, even without the air sculpture behind her, "[twigs would] have been plenty captivating on her own, dancing slowly and fluidly as if swimming through mid-air, hitting every quivering note with perfect abandon" (Unterberger).

twigs, whose real name is Tahliah Barnett and who is currently in a legal battle over her use of the name "twigs" (thus the FKA—"Formerly Known As"), is often noted for her unique manner of performance, live and in her music videos. Her dancing draws on a variety of African American styles, including hip hop, krump, and vogue (possibly from her past career as a backup dancer, as twigs studied ballet as a child), and FKA twigs' physicality thrives on the juxtaposition of large and clunky isolations with fluid arm, hand, and hip movements, occasionally sharply accented to match her music. Often

donned in creams, whites, and beiges accentuated with metallic embellishments and jewelry, her false nails long and bejeweled, her hair a combination of braids, twists, and gelled curlicues, twigs' fashion sense proves as complicated and engaging as her dancing. Vocally, twigs' breathy singing style betrays a wide vocal range, which she only occasionally features in her songs. She instead prefers to keep her voice tempered, controlled, and pitched quite high, suggesting a frailty belied by her almost aggressive dancing and oftentimes ostentatious performance outfits.

Many of twigs' vocal and physical style trends are on display in the music video for "Two Weeks." While rather different aesthetically from the live performance on *The Tonight Show*, the music video is still equally elegant and otherworldly. In the video, twigs appears to be some sort of goddess/queen figure, presiding over her "harem" of identical, yet miniaturized, subjects. The video, which was met with wide critical acclaim, is steeped in the fantastic, as many of twigs' projects are. In this case, twigs appears to be drawing on ancient Egyptian mysticism, with twigs presenting herself as some sort of divine ancient Egyptian entity.

FKA twigs' fantastical visual use of ancient Egypt is not wholly original, even if much else of her aesthetic is. Ancient Egypt has been a fascination of Western society for centuries. "Egyptomania," as this particular obsession has been called, first gripped the Western world following Napoleon's famous expedition to the region in 1798, and has gone through regular phases of popularity, rediscovery, and appropriation by various groups, from wealthy elites to marginalized peoples. The visual culture of ancient Egypt has influenced everything from fashion design, to architecture, to multiple films and

television series. With a wide variety of books published on the subject of ancient Egypt, seemingly no topic has been deemed too dull for publication and consumption by Westerners.

What is perhaps lesser known by white Europeans and North Americans, however, is the way that some members of the black community have embraced ancient Egypt as a cultural symbol of their own, arguing that the culture and peoples of ancient Egypt were actually black. This belief that certain ancient civilizations—not only ancient Egypt, but also to a lesser degree ancient Greece—were black, known as Afrocentrism, resists Eurocentric readings of the past, and has been used to inspire and establish various black identities since the 1960s (Bernal, Diop). In fact, the work of some scholars suggests that the seeds of Afrocentrism were sown as early as the nineteenth century (Trafton). While the idea of a black ancient Egypt remains a controversial one, with scientists on both sides of the argument providing research that supports their particular claims, the disputes held over Afrocentrism have not stopped the idea from providing many black Westerners with a sense of pride and empowerment in an intellectually and materially glorious ancient past.

Afrocentric visions of ancient Egypt have also inspired various types of black creative media—of which FKA twigs is certainly one producer—particularly within a genre known as Afrofuturism, a term coined by cultural critic Mark Dery in 1992. Broadly, Afrofuturism is a genre that includes science fiction and fantasy-inspired art, literature, music, film, etc. that draw on the African diaspora experience using aesthetic signifiers from ancient cultures (particularly ancient Egypt), African art, and futuristic

technology. Afrofuturism aims to explore black cultural trauma, largely the experience and long-term consequences of the Atlantic slave trade, through a metaphorical lens by connecting the abduction of African peoples by the West and the contemporary alienation felt by many black individuals living in the Western world (primarily England and the United States).to science fiction narratives of aliens and alien abductions. It also often aims to present an fantastic and empowered future for black culture.

Afrofuturism often exists, however, as more than a genre or aesthetic. This report contends it actually exists at the junction between genre fiction and alternative and activist media, functioning as a creative critical outlet for expressing counter-hegemonic and resistant understandings of history and race, and that ancient Egypt's significant presence within Afrofuturism is key to the genre's empowering potential. Negotiating the alternative use of ancient Egypt within this fantastic form of media will require multiple steps for comprehension.

This project will first consider the important role ancient Egypt has played in influencing Western identity and culture, both for white Westerners and black, and will provide a better understanding of both Egyptomania and Afrocentrism. It will then provide an analysis of how the discourse surrounding alternative and activist media and the discourse surrounding science fiction and fantasy genre fiction contain similar structural goals and intentions. Some of the main intentions of alternative and activist media are to critique mainstream media and society and provide an opposing viewpoint; fantasy and science fiction genre fiction oftentimes also work to both critique

contemporary culture and provide an opposing vision of what society might look like in a better, and sometimes worse, world.

Afrofuturism's radical roots will be made clearer after the relationship between alternative and activist media and genre media is illuminated. It is because of the radical transformative capability that Afrofuturism has for taking not only painful past cultural experiences but also white-dominated genre fiction and combining them into a new and often-times politically motivated artistic platform, that allows it to function as an alternative genre, curating its own unique aesthetic that challenges the idea that fantasy, science fiction, and the various narrative and visual elements of those specific genres belong strictly to the dominant white culture. And considering ancient Egypt's longstanding presence within white Western identity, as well as its popularity within Afrofuturist works, Afrofuturism's adoption of Afrocentrism's vision of ancient Egypt only serves to bolters the aesthetic's alternative nature.

Afrofuturism's empowerment potential will be investigated by looking at how ancient Egypt has come to be used in certain types of Afrofuturist media. As previously mentioned, Afrofuturism can be found in multiple mediums and contexts. Because this report attempts to position those multiple mediums and contexts within the theory found in genre studies and the theory found in alternative media studies, a humanist cultural studies approach will be utilized. While important work could be done through quantifying the presence of ancient Egypt in Afrofuturist literature or film or music, the aim of this work is to qualify how ancient Egypt is being implemented, and to what ends. The goal is to investigate what ancient Egypt has come to mean to some contemporary

black Westerners through an examination of the existing theory in relation to real-world creative products, and as such, a cultural studies approach is most beneficial.

Given Afrofuturism's broad applications, the research for this report will focus strictly on audio-visual examples rather than art, music, fashion, etc. for the sake of simplicity and cohesiveness. The scope of its concerns will also be limited when it comes to the issues Afrofuturism addresses. That is to say, while Afrofuturism speaks to issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality, this report will be focusing primarily on race and gender. Though the other elements of the genre/aesthetic are undeniably important and a definite element of Afrofuturism's radical intent, the continued discussion over the race of ancient Egyptians suggests that a large motivation for Afrofuturism is to present an oppositional image of the era, thus it is the chief concern, though gender will also prove key to the discussion later during the case study on FKA twigs.

Historically, many black artists and authors have drawn inspiration from the culture and imagery of ancient Egypt. However, with FKA twigs recent success and her evident personal commitment to creating thought-provoking music and music videos, she and her video for "Two Weeks" prove especially rich for analysis. FKA twigs is a contemporarily relevant figure for mining the ways Afrofuturism is a product of both genre media and radical media, and placing her in the midst of each will be a two-part process. First, an examination of FKA twigs' career and her use of fantastic imagery and unusual technology—particularly in relation to other potential Afrofuturist artists currently working—will be provided. Following this, a textual analysis of the "Two Weeks" video itself will take place. Comments made by those involved in the filmmaking

process will also be factored into the discussion of the thematic intention of the music video.

ANCIENT EGYPT IN THE WEST

The most has been written by far about the West's fascination with Ancient Egypt. Bob Briar takes a more informal historical approach to the West's enthusiasm over Egyptomania in his text of the same name, and James Stevens Curl looks strictly at the West as well in his painstakingly compiled *The Egyptian Revival*, which examines the way art and architecture have been influenced by the aesthetics of Ancient Egypt. Melani McAllister, Lynn Parramore, and Erik Hornung, however, attempt to provide a more complex and nuanced understanding of Ancient Egypt's significance in the West.

Hornung's text, *The Secret Lore of Egypt: Its Impact on the West*, emphasizes the mystical appeal that the ancient civilization has had for Western society. Hornung takes an historical approach to the mapping of ancient Egyptian occultism throughout the Western world, beginning with Hermetism and ending with ancient Egypt as a symbol of hope and wonder for contemporary Westerners. Parramore's text, *Reading the Sphinx: Ancient Egypt in Nineteenth-Century Literary Culture*, on the other hand, focuses on the impact that ancient Egypt had on literary productions of the time. Parramore's work attempts to deconstruct the creation of nineteenth century Western identity through the use of ancient Egyptian signifiers in the cultural works of the century, and it's notable for its inclusion of gender into the discussion.

However, it is Melanie McAllister's book, *Epic Encounters*, that provides some of the most relevant and complex analysis. McAllister's book more broadly focuses on the Middle East as a whole in the United States, but her discussion of America's obsession with the spectacle of the Middle East and the commodification of King Tut in relation to

oil politics are most valuable. McAllister argues early on in her text that official American interest in the Middle East has "vacillated between two poles: distance, othering, and containment define the first; affiliation, appropriation, and co-optation constitute the second" (2). These two approaches most obviously play out in the United States' simultaneous fascination with ancient Egypt and wariness with contemporary Arab and Muslim society. She also notes the "emerging nineteenth-century fascination with vision and spectacle," which "encouraged Europeans and Americans to view the world itself as an extended exhibition" (16). While her comments on the spectacle are in reference to America's fascination with the Middle East as the origin of the Christian Holy Land, they also speak to the West's obsession with ancient Egypt, particularly the cultural narrative that ancient Egypt exists not as a part of Egyptian history, but as human history, thus allowing its innovations, antiquities, and other extolled glories to be claimed as artifacts of the Western world rather than the Eastern, or more specifically, Egyptian.

King Tut, of course, is one such Ancient Egyptian antiquity that McAllister asserts has been co-opted by the West under the guise of belonging to all of mankind rather than to Egyptians. McAllister argues that the popularity of the King Tut museum experience both "exemplified the significance of cultural exchange as an instrument in international relations," given the exhibit tour followed the 1973-1974 OPEC oil embargo, and reaffirmed the idea that Egyptians were not the true owners of the artifacts by framing the exhibit through its discoverer's eyes—those of the white European, Howard Carter.

Though McAllister's text is the most nuanced, it's worth mentioning that University College London has published an entire series of works dealing with the subject of ancient Egypt known as *Encounters with Ancient Egypt*. Each book in the eight book series collects multiple writings on a given theme with a variety of topics covered. This series is impressive largely because of its size, and is useful insomuch as it provides glimmers of insight into a variety of aspects of ancient Egypt in the West, as well as ancient Egypt in the eyes of modern day Egyptians. However, the level of analysis leaves something to be desired.

While the bulk of the literature about ancient Egypt stems from the white perspective—there is much more than has been presented here—Afrocentrism as well has its own body of literature, small as it may be in comparison. Molefi Kete Asante has been one of the key figures in the movement since 1980, when he published *Afrocentrism: The Theory of Social Change*. He has since published a variety of writings on the topic, but perhaps his best known text is *The Afrocentric Idea*, in which Asante challenges critiques of Afrocentrism and presents his own arguments about the subject matter. Cheikh Anta Diop is another important scholar for establishing Afrocentrism as a legitimate interpretation of the pre-colonial past. Diop's text, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, outlines a theory for how humanity evolved with Ancient Egypt as black, given its location in Africa, as well as presents both arguments and counterarguments for the "negro origin" of the culture. There is also Martin Bernal, whose three volume *Black Athena* asserts that Ancient Greece was black, given that he believes it was colonized by Ancient Egypt and the Phoenicians. These figures are three

of the most referenced in Afrocentric discussions, but there have been other, more contemporary, scholars.

There is, of course, the work previously mentioned, *Ancient Egypt in Africa*. O'Connor and Reid's anthology features work both by and in reference to Martin Bernal, as well pieces that focus on the work of Diop. But there are also chapters dedicated to locating Ancient Egypt in relation to different areas of the African continent, such as South Africa and West Africa, and other chapters concerned with integrating Sudan and Nubia into the discussion. Robert Bauval and Thomas Brophy also present a more recent analysis and argument for why Ancient Egypt was black in their book *Black Genesis: The Prehistoric Origins of Ancient Egypt*. Brophy and Bauval argue for the existence of a black civilization before the Ancient Egyptians that they refer to as the "star people," and whose cave art and megaliths can still be found standing today.

But of particular interest is once again Melanie McAllister, who continues her discussion of the popularity of King Tut in her text, *Epic Encounters*, by taking her analysis in a different direction than most other scholars by positioning the arrival of King Tut in the United States within the burgeoning Afrocentrism movement. She explores how, contrary to the white Western idea that King Tut, as with all ancient Egyptian antiquities, belonged to a universal (read: white) history of civilization, instead he belonged to a black history. McAllister points out how this reading of ancient Egypt complicates traditional Western notions of civilization, for, "If ancient Egypt was reclaimed as a black civilization, then 'civilization' could be claimed for blacks. And this was not just *a* civilization, but *the* foundation of 'Western civilization'" (142). McAllister

concludes her discussion of a black King Tut by discussing how this particular image of the young king, and of a black Egypt in general, was then transformed into a commodity by popular white comedian Steve Martin through his hit song, "King Tut," and famous *Saturday Night Live* performance of said song (more recently performed once more during the series' fortieth anniversary episode), which relied on elements from various forms of African American music and style for humor.

Of the most use, however, is Scott Trafton's work, *Egypt Land: Race and Nineteenth Century American Egyptomania*. Trafton's book sets the stage for an Afrocentric reading of ancient Egypt, and how it conflicted with the white European vision of the era, before the term even came into existence by arguing "that much of nineteenth-century American racial and national identity can be said to partake of a schematic split structured by the conflictual visions of ancient Egypt" (4). Trafton's text thus analyzes the various ways both white and black nineteenth century Americans related to ancient Egyptian culture and history as a means to support beliefs about their respective ethnic culture's power.

Trafton's book is also useful for its willingness to critique not only white appropriations of ancient Egypt, but black appropriations as well, by discussing a concept he refers to as "black Orientalism." According to Trafton,

> black Orientalism [occupies] the spaces between European American imperialism and African American oppression, between white ambivalence and black identification, between interconnecting images of pharaohs, slaves, homeland, exodus, black Orientalism was structured by as many contradictions and overlapping valences as other branches of more general Orientalism (21).

In other words, African Americans in nineteenth century America experienced a multiplicity of identities which allowed them to both find empowerment through ancient Egypt and simultaneously buy into the Orientalist structures that contextualized ancient Egypt in Western society in the first place. It is a nuanced analysis of early Afrocentrism that is often times overlooked by fellow scholars of the movement.

ALTERNATIVE MEDIA & GENRE MEDIA—A BRIDGE BETWEEN THE TWO

The literature available on alternative and activist media has grown over the years, but with more variety in discussion comes more variety in potential definition of just what alternative and activist media means. John Downing, considered to be at the forefront of alternative media studies, has crafted a working understanding of what alternative media is, though it's important to note that his research refers to alternative media more distinctly as *radical* media. Downing has organized a series of ten potential elements that set radical alternative media apart from conventional "mainstream" media, with his ten markers varying from minority ethnic-based content/production to media that breaks conventional rules to media that is small scale and "generally underfunded" (xi). Downing's discussion also notes some of the more complicated elements of alternative media, including the fact that—by his definition—even wildly negative media (such as racist, sexist, homophobic, etc. media) can be considered alternative depending on its venue, as well as the "almost oxymoronic" use of the term "alternative" given that "everything, at some point, is alternative to something else" (v).

Downing's analysis of radical media is also of use given his incorporation of aesthetics into the discussion. In his discussion of aesthetics, Downing considers how politically motivated art "might feed into alternative media content," allowing for a productive conversation to ensue between political artists and alternative media activists (57). Downing then incorporates three art movements into his analysis, the Dada movement, surrealism, and the Situationists, as well as Benjamin's idea of the "aura" and Brecht's idea of radical theatre. Downing's purpose is to explain (and in doing so,

legitimize) the way that art in its various forms has, throughout the decades, been wildly critical of mainstream conventions and discourses, thus has been connected to radical and alternative ways of thinking.

Chris Atton's model of alternative, as well as radical, media is also worth noting. Drawing on the work of Downing and others, Atton also attempts to incorporate "artistic and literary" media into his definition instead of solely focusing on "political and 'resistance'" media, though this does suggest that artistic and literary media cannot be inherently political in and of itself. Atton's work on alternative media is doubly important for his inclusion of Foucault's idea of the "insurrection of subjugated knowledges" and Spivak's idea of "native informants" into his discussion, insisting that, if we consider alternative media through those lenses, it then allows for disenfranchised voices to speak for themselves, a considerably radical notion (9).

Atton's work is valuable for its inclusion of electronic media as well. Electronic media, which tends to involve the internet, is referred to within media studies as "new media," and new media has proven a useful tool for activists. Media scholar Leah Lievrouw has done a significant amount of work on alternative and activist new media, including creating a working definition of what new media means. According to Lievrouw and her colleague, Sonia Livingstone, new media can be defined "as information and communication technologies and their social contexts," which then include three elements. The first are the "material artifacts," which are the physical devices used for communication, the second are the communication "practices" people

engage in through their devices, and the third are the "larger social arrangements" people create "around the artifacts and devices" (7).

Lievrouw then goes on to present a variety of new media "genres" which she considers to be "the means for creating and maintaining community and social context, and the cultural products of those communities and contexts" (21) While the use of the word "genre" may seem questionable in this context, the subsequent discussion of her genres is rather useful, particular her discussion of culture jamming. As a genre, culture jamming critiques mainstream, generally capitalist, culture and media by repurposing images from popular culture for the sake of subversive art (22). The term itself was coined by cultural critic Mark Dery in the early nineties, but according to Lievrouw, culture jamming predates the internet given the critical and subversive art movements, Dada and Situationism—as previously discussed by Downing.

While culture jamming tends to be critical of pop culture, there are alternative and activist media scholars who consider some avenues of pop culture itself to be, perhaps surprisingly, alternative. Ron Eyerman and Arnold Jamison have done work that focuses entirely on how popular music has been utilized throughout social movements, which are at their core inherently alternative. Eyerman and Jamison note that scholars within the humanities or cultural studies arenas tend to minimize the political motivation behind many cultural products, which is an oversight they work to correct (8). They attempt to do this by first arguing that social movements, through a process that Eyerman and Jamison refer to as cognitive praxis, work to reformulate movement identities, as well as the identities of the individuals who participate in those movements, with cognitive

praxis drawing "attention to the creative role of consciousness and cognition in all human action, individual and collective." As such, the creative works produced for and by social movements help contribute to the cognitive praxis process, and are therefore deliberately political in their creation and execution (21).

Eyerman and Jamison's work focuses largely on music, which they argue, "Perhaps more effectively than any other form of expression, music also recalls a meaning that lies outside and beyond the self. In that sense it can be utopian and premodern." They go on to state that when it comes to social movements, "even mass-produced popular music can take on a truth-bearing significance" (24). Their work becomes further complex when they begin to discuss the "mythical" formation of American national identity, and how social movements—through cognitive praxis—have come to call those identities into question, stating that, "From the abolitionists to the creationists, American social movements have continually actualized and reinvented the myth of people in their cognitive praxis." The result has been an alternative "folk culture, in which music, song, and dance have played a defining role" (49). And, according to Eyerman and Jamison, American popular folk music can trace its origins to the spirituals of black slaves.

The body of academic literature on science fiction and fantasy genre fiction is not overly expansive, but a small corpus does exist. Perhaps first what's important to note is how genre media is understood theoretically. Henry Jenkins' work on genre and fan reception in his book, *Textual Poachers*, is most useful. In *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins argues that in traditional discussions of genre media, "such models ignore the role(s)

played by genre in readers' efforts to make meaning from textual materials" (125). Jenkins' complaint is that classic models for understanding genre work in a "top-down" fashion, where media producers hold all the intellectual power over a genre's meaning while media audiences passively accept certain genre paradigms. Jenkins' analysis of the ways in which fans respond to and re-envision their source material suggest a power dynamic contradictory to previous understandings of viewer participation.

Scholarly discussions of the term "genre fiction," rather than simply "genre," however, is surprisingly more difficult to come by, though scholarly writing on the genres *included* within genre fiction—such as fantasy, science fiction, mystery, and horror—are much more prevalent. Interestingly enough, however, discussion of what genre fiction is (as previously mentioned, generally it's understood simply as the antithesis of literary fiction, which exceeds the confines of any single genre and is therefore considered to be of more cultural and artistic value) and why it merits attention happens routinely in popular literary media—namely magazines like *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, and *Time*. This seems to be as clear an indication as any of the value academia has placed on the study of genre fiction, that the only avenues through which it can be continuously discussed are popular and non-academic in nature.

Still, a small amount of scholarly work has been done. Of most interest is the brief writing of Nancy J. Holland, who argues succinctly that genre fiction—by which she means the western, the romance novel, science fiction, and the detective novel—holds some similarities with other more "elite" forms of popular culture: photography and popular music, particularly the forms of popular music that originate within the African

American community—jazz, blues, ragtime, and rock. Holland begins her comparison analysis by noting the structural similarities of popular music and genre fiction, in that with each cultural production there is an identifiable beginning, middle, and end. She also highlights that each can produce "iconic moments" that can be returned to and referenced by audiences. Her final point about the subversive element of genre fiction also merits mentioning. According to Holland,

> Just as photographs reveal a purified visual reality and popular music a purified emotional one, genre fiction reveals a world in which the good guys always win, love conquers all, the bad guys always get caught, and humans always prevail. In disclosing this to us, genre writing gives us not "truth" but worlds just a little bit different from our own, familiar enough to reassure us, but also, I would argue, different enough to show us ways in which we might make our world a little bit better.

Holland's work legitimizes genre fiction in two ways: The first is through comparing it to other more respectable forms of popular culture (though this particular way of legitimization is mildly frustrating in that it denies that genre fiction may have standalone value), and the second is through noting the subversive elements inherent in the genre fiction structure.

Acclaimed literary novelist Margaret Atwood also discusses the power that genre fiction can have on viewers and readers in her non-fiction book, *In Other Worlds*, though she does not use the term "genre fiction;" she simply provides an analysis of the value of science fiction media. During one chapter in particular, "Burning Bushes," Atwood runs down a list of things "[science fiction] narratives can do that 'novels' as usually defined cannot do" (62). According to Atwood,

> they can explore the consequences of new and proposed technologies….they can explore the nature and limits of what it means to be human….Finally, SF stories can explore the outer reaches of the imagination by taking us boldly where nor man has gone before, or indeed ever (62-3).

Brian Laetz and Joshua J. Johnston are two scholars who have attempted to define what kind of stories make up the fantasy genre by analyzing the characteristics of the films and literary texts that are considered "fantasy" by the general public. After a thorough examination of a variety of fantasy media, Laetz and Johnston conclude that, "fantastic narratives are fictional action stories with prominent supernatural content that is inspired by myth, legends, or folklore. Further, this content is believed by few or no audience members and is believed by audiences to have been believed by another culture." This is worthwhile to consider, as the audience's frame of reference impacts their interpretation of the story they're presented with.

Brian Attebery is another scholar who has written profusely on fantasy, and in fact might be one of the most prolific academics regarding the genre. Attebery's work is notable, not only for its expansiveness, but also for his dedication to exploring diversity within fantasy writings, whether that be gender in *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction* or discussing the importance of race in fantasy at the 2010 Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts. At this conference, Attebery argued that,

> While it might seem…that fantasy is merely an escape from real-world conflicts such as racial strife, it [becomes] clear…that the fantastic is a powerful tool for examining all things human, including our tendency to gang up on one another based on any perceived physical or cultural dissimilarity.

Attebery goes on to note that, "Though race is a bogus category biologically, we tend to act and speak and write as if it were real, which makes races at least as real as, say,

genres." This is the thrust of Attebery's article on the significance of race in fantasy, which he ties to Benedict Anderson's idea of imagined communities and how the construction of race in fantastical setting reflects the way people in the real world create national identities.

Though the amount of literature on fantasy and science fiction media is relatively small in size, conversations about race and these two types of genre fiction are not limited to Attebery. Myles Balfe, for example, brings together discussions of the fantasy genre with Said's theory of Orientalism. Balfe is largely concerned with the ways that Western fantasy texts construct Others opposite the "'Western' characters as the 'good guys.'" Balfe argues all fantasy narratives must be interrogated, for "the textual landscapes in Genre Fantasy are never pristinely innocent, and an argument could be made that they are even less so precisely because of their self-proclaimed 'fantastic' nature."

De Witt Douglas Kilgore also believes that science fiction narratives must be interrogated in terms of race, technology, and future visions of utopia through a genre of media he refers to as "astrofuturism" (ostensibly a reference to Afrofuturism, though no mention of the genre appears in his text of the same name). Kilgore's work focuses on exploring how science, race, and images of the future in science fiction media reflects the socio-political culture of the times they were produced in. He argues that the "dream of the space frontier" is the next iteration of the American dream, and as such, he "read[s] astrofuturism as part of, rather than apart from, the political and social struggles that have marked the American landscape during this past half century" (11).

Kilgore's comments provide an excellent starting point for the bridging of alternative and activist media and genre fiction.

To begin, it's important to remember that key figures in alternative media studies have all created allowances to various degrees for the presence of artistic, musical, and literary media within alternative and activist media spaces. Science fiction and fantasy genre fiction may at first seem like less likely candidates for the occupation of those spaces, but the discourse on fantasy and science fiction media routinely considers the subversive potential of genre fiction, and oftentimes explicitly suggests that genre fiction has, or can have, radical leanings.

Downing's discussion of aesthetics aims to point out the way that art has been used to critique mainstream media. Jenkins' and Holland's insistence that genre fiction can be subversive for all the ways it reveals to audiences worlds that are "familiar enough to reassure us, but also…different enough to show us ways in which we might make our own world a little better," seems remarkably similar. Atwood echoes with a similar statement, insisting that science fiction provides an opportunity for audiences to "explore the outer reaches of the imagination by taking us boldly where no man has gone before, or indeed ever." The *Star Trek* reference is especially poignant in light of the creator's, Gene Roddenberry, desire to write and cast a television show that reflected, not only the diversity of the world in the sixties, but also of a future world (Maloney). For 1966, this was in itself a radical idea for primetime television.

Atton's understanding of alternative media is also key for the incorporation of select genre fiction under the alternative and activist media umbrella. Atton's

argument that part of activist media's value comes from its tendency to provide disenfranchised and marginalized peoples and communities with voices that reflect their needs and desires pairs well with Attebery's and Kilgore's interpretation of race and fantasy/science fiction texts. Attebery asserts "that the fantastic is a powerful tool for examining all things human, including our tendency to gang up on one another based on any perceived physical or cultural dissimilarity." While this suggests that fantasy literature continues the racist behavior found in the non-fictional world, it also suggests that certain authors who come from oppressed backgrounds could critique those racist behaviors within fantastic texts, and that to do so in such an unrealistic genre could perhaps draw attention to the same racial inequalities in existence in the real world. Kilgore's insistence that astrofuturism can also be imbued with political commentary maintains the idea that, when coming from the voices of "native informants," to borrow the term from Spivak that Atton utilizes in his analysis, science fiction also has room for radical narratives.

If I have not proved yet that genre fiction can and has functioned as alternative media, then that is all right; I am not intending to prove that exactly. Instead what I hope to have achieved thus far is an understanding that science fiction and fantasy genre fiction has the potential for alternative, activist, and even radical, inclinations. Afrofuturism, and ancient Egypt's role within it, is one such alternative, activist construction, and it is the true bridge between alternative and activist media and genre fiction.

AFROFUTURISM AS RESISTANCE

In 1994, Mark Dery—previously referenced as the man who coined the term "culture jamming"—published a series of three interviews under the title, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." The interviews themselves focus on the topic of African American participation with the science fiction genre, whether it is through reading, writing, music-listening, music-creating, movie watching, or moviemaking, and while they are each uniquely fascinating, what is most often taken away from "Black to the Future" is Dery's use of the word "Afro-futurism." According to Dery, who had unwittingly invented yet another soon-to-be-popular word,

> Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-America concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future—might, for want of a better term, be called "Afro-futurism" (180).

Afrofuturism had existed, of course, long before Dery had arrived and provided the convenient term for both academics and general fans of the aesthetic alike to use. Sun Ra and Geroge Clinton are generally considered to be the original Afrofuturist artists, and following in their footsteps, much Afrofuturist media lies in the musical realm (Womack). But Afrofuturism has only grown more popular as time has gone on, and within the last decade it has seen a surge of academic writing on the subject.

It's largely agreed that Afrofuturism came about from black artists of all mediums in an effort to provide oppositional images of blackness in popular media and culture. Historically, science fiction and fantasy genre fiction has depicted black individuals as either mystical guidance figures for white characters, or barred black characters from

their stories altogether. The "magical Negro" trope is perhaps the most insidious stereotype of blackness present in Western media, for on the exterior, it's easy to interpret the existence of these generally significant characters as equal players within a given narrative. Cerise L. Glenn and Landra J. Cunningham have written about the presence of the magical Negro in white salvation films, claiming that,

> Although the magical Negro trend has gained more popularity in recent years, the underlying traits and characteristics of these characters has been present in film for quite some time. More than half a century ago, Sidney Poitier and other Black actors were placed in White worlds to help White people improve themselves. These magical Negroes were often wise, morally upright Blacks who served as the moral conscience of White characters.

Glenn and Cunningham connect the trope to other racist depictions of blackness, including the Uncle Tom figure and the Mammy. (Sheri Parks has also written about the gendered version of the magical Negro in her text, *Fierce Angels*, I would like to point out.) Their work is also important for its deconstruction of the magical Negro trope, explaining that commonalities between depictions of the magical Negro include:

- Using magical/spiritual skills for the white character
- Assuming service roles
- Offering "folk wisdom" rather than "intellectual cognition"
- Possessing a limited role outside of being the magical guide
- Being unable to use talents for themselves

If African Americans are not magical Negros in science fiction and fantasy narratives, however, then they are generally not present at all. Samuel Delany speaks of this ousting during his interview with Mark Dery, stating that,

> It was fairly easy to understand why, say, from the fifties through the seventies, the black readership of [science fiction] was fairly low…The flashing lights, the dials, and the rest of the imagistic paraphernalia of science fiction functioned as social signs—signs people learned to read very quickly. They signaled

> technology. And technology was like a placard on the door saying, "Boys Club! Girls, keep out. Blacks and Hispanics and the poor in general, go away!" (188).

Though Delany is talking about a time period roughly fifty years ago, his sentiment is echoed by Kilgore in *Astrofuturism*, which was published only in 2003, just over a decade ago. But this pitiful state of affairs has inspired a literary and artistic revolt of sorts against these rare and disparaging visions of blackness. In fact, Kilgore argues that the *only* way to combat these images, or lack thereof, is for African Americans to participate themselves, and "contest those parts of American culture to which we are not supposed to belong" (16). Kilgore's comments are more or less a call to action to provide alternative media images of African Americans.

Renowned Caribbean author Nalo Hopkinson seems to be putting into practice what Kilgore has demanded in theory, once chronicling during a conference presentation her adventures in splicing together—through a variety of handy means—a small child's doll and a My Little Pony toy horse, explaining why she chose to alter the two toys the way that she did. For example, Hopkinson painted her creation black. "It's one of the things I do," she explains, "because it's so important to me to see myself and my people reflected. That's what pop culture is: a huge funhouse mirror that distorts reflections." This relates to the point of Hopkinson's piece: that popular culture, particularly of the fantastic variety, is a space one looks for reflections of oneself, which is why genres like fantasy cannot be dismissed. And if others will not provide Hopkinson with the representation she desires, then she—likely to Kilgore's pleasure—will provide those images herself. To return to Jenkins, Hopkinson could perhaps be considered a type of

textual poacher, taking this fantastical textual material—the My Little Pony doll—and making her own unique meaning from its reconstruction.

Afrofuturism as a genre and aesthetic (it is referred to as both things by different scholars and participants), is a large-scale version Hopkinson's small-scale creative re-purposing/textual poaching. While I don't mean to suggest that a singular textual product, such as a TV show, is easily comparable to an entire textual genre, like science fiction, or that fans of a TV show who create fanworks are wholly tantamount to the authors, artists, and musicians who work within Afrofuturism, there are arguably similar strains in motivation and action between the fans Jenkins discusses in *Textual Poachers* and those who create Afrofuturist media. According to Ytasha L. Womack, Afrofuturism's goal goes far beyond Dery's definition of African American themes and technoculture. For Womack, "Afrofuturists redefine culture and notions of blackness for today and the future…In some cases, it's a total re-envisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques." Certain elements, for example, draw heavily on Afrocentric readings of ancient civilizations (largely Egypt) in an effort to reimagine history, decenter whiteness, and destabilize Eurocentrism (Jackson and Moody-Freeman, 9). In other words, it's arguable that Afrofuturists are textual poachers with much higher stakes.

Scholar Adilifu Nama would agree with Womack, as he argues that Afrofuturism examples "how the intersection of the black imagination with the [science fiction] medium often results in imagery and ideas that work to destabilize fixed notions of black

subjectivity and create a powerful, albeit marginal, space for the articulation of a racialized aesthetic" (163). Nama concludes his analysis by stating the following:

> In the final analysis, any black representation in a science fiction film evokes America's struggle to confront and, too often, repress the nagging problem of race. Obviously, how [science fiction] film addresses race is not a panacea for real racial issues that are present in American society. Nevertheless, [science fiction] film is a bellweather genre for how we imagine ourselves, who we think we want to become, and possibly what we will become if we continue on our present course. In this sense, [science fiction] film is an important symbol of the social progress of a society still struggling to come to terms with the legacy of American racism (172).

Alondra Nelson, one of the foremothers of Afrofuturist criticism, also believes that Afrofuturism can act as a "funhouse mirror" of sorts that represents more than mere science fiction or fantasy narratives. "Cultural production can produce social reflection," she insists. She's speaking of the technological aspects of Afrofuturism, and how the artistic nature of the genre can provide insight into how technology has come to matter in "everyday life." But her comments are applicable to the aesthetic beyond the solely technological.

Many individuals who participate in Afrofuturism emphasize the fact that in many ways, the contemporary black experience in the West feels rather like a true alien abduction story. Mark Dery perhaps puts it the most succinctly:

> …African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees; they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done; and technology is too often brought to bear on black bodies (branding, forced sterilization, the Tsukgee experiment, and tasers come readily to mind) (180).

Afrofuturism oftentimes attempts to address this similarity, and the alien abduction metaphor is thus made real within the confines of the pages or the lyrics of the song. Afrofuturist artist Tanekeya Word would agree. When asked during an interview why Afrofuturist musical artists commonly take on alien alter egos, Word responded, **"**At the foundation of it all, all artists create what they know. Afrofuturist musicians have an innate, ambiguous shape-shifting quality within them." (Pezanoski-Browne). Word's insights suggest a new level of empowerment can be found within Afrofuturism, that the genre is no longer simply a space to explore feelings of displacement, but to embrace those feelings wholeheartedly in integrate them into one's own identity.

However, some may disagree with or wish to complicate Word's insistence that these presented alien alter egos are occurring on a "mainstream level." Dery makes a variety of interesting points before he presents his interviews in "Black to the Future," but one of the most relevant—in addition to the various observations and comments already noted above—is the fact that science fiction maintains a "sublegitimate status" within Western literature, a status which is shared with the "subaltern position" (and here we possibly have another reference to Spivak) of African Americans in this country. Dery is not the only critic to note the parallel positions held by both African Americans and genre fiction. British scholar Kodwo Eshun has also made a similar observation, stating that "The conventions of science fiction, marginalized within literature yet central to modern thought, can function as allegories for the systemic oppression of post-slavery black subjects in the twentieth century."

These allegories can be taken a step further with the introduction of feminist thought. Black feminist scholars have been working to position feminism within Afrofuturism for years, with many citing Octavia Butler's literature as intrinsic to the Afrofuturist paradigm. In Womack's comprehensive book, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, she states that the three most significant people to the creation of Afrofuturism, the three "sides of that Giza-like pyramid," are Sun Ra, George Clinton, and Octavia Butler (2). In her work on the Afrofuturist feminist elements of Butler's literature, Susana M. Morris works to bridge the scholarly gap between Black feminism and Afrofuturism. Morris argues that "Afrofuturism's transgressive politics align with the fundamental tenets of black feminist thought," and that it's paramount to see both intellectual movements in conversation with one another. Morris continues, "Just as Afrofuturism underscores the centrality of blacks to futurist knowledge and cultural production and resistance to tyranny, so does black feminist thought contend that black people's experience, knowledge, and culture are vitally important."

In her work on the subject, Womack speaks of the freedom that Afrofuturism allows for Black feminist artists, arguing that "Afrofuturism is a free space for women, a door ajar, arms wide open, a literal and figurative space for black women to be themselves" (100). Womack sees this "decision-making power over their creative voice" as one of the genre's greatest achievements. "They make their own standards and sculpt their own lens through which to view the world and for the world to view them," Womack insists, and "Most important, their voice is not specifically shaped in opposition to a male or racist perspective" (104). Black Afrofuture feminists transcend the

limitations pressed upon them and free themselves from the gender and racial binaries the real world has attempted to entrap them within.

Tanekeya Word has also spoken on the overlap between Afrofuturism and Black feminism. According to Word, Afrofuturist Feminists do not negate their history, as the group works on a continuum of past, present, future and must utilize the Sankofa principle of 'it is not wrong for one to go back and take that which they have forgotten' or 'simply go back and take.'" Word's comments are particularly relevant for their efforts to connect ancient African culture, future African empowerment, and Afrofuturist feminism together. Furthermore, not only does Word work to relate these three strains together, but she all but demands that Afrofuturist feminists must actively "go back and take that which they have forgotten," or rather perhaps as some might say, that which has been taken from them. Ancient Egypt surely functions as one of the past continuums Word references, even if is not mentioned directly.

Admittedly, ancient Egypt is rarely discussed at length within Afrofuturism scholarship, despite the fact that "Afrofuturists love to anchor their work in golden eras from times long gone, and there's not an ancient culture that merges the heights of science and the esoteric like the Egyptians and the Nubians" (Womack, 81). And given Afrofuturism's link to Afrocentrism, it's clear that ancient Egypt has also been manifested as a necessary element of Afrofuturism's radical perspective. This is largely a result of the horrific act of transporting millions of Africans through the Middle Passage during the Atlantic slave trade, which resulted in the destruction of many types of African cultural knowledge. Cultural practices and beliefs were wiped out through generations,

leaving many contemporary African Americans at a loss in terms of their ability to trace their cultural lineage from before the slave trade.

Nalo Hopkinson has commented on the removal of ancient Egypt from contemporary discussions of African history. While speaking of her time working at a museum in the ancient Egypt exhibit, Hopkinson notes that most museum goers had no knowledge of Egypt existing within the African continent.

> But I see where their ignorance comes from. Nowhere that I could find in the whole two floors of the exhibition was the word "Africa" written. The map of Egypt that covered the floor of one space showed only Egypt, as though it exists in a vacuum. It's easy for people to assume that Egypt is a European civilization; by omission, they're being led to believe that it is. By omission, they're being told that ancient Egypt was "Greco-Roman" or "the near east." It's anyplace but Africa.

Hopkinson's experience speaks to McAllister's discussion of the consistent positioning of ancient Egypt within a universal world history that is often subtly coded as white and Western. That her experience occurred within a museum, institutions perceived as strongholds of impartial knowledge, is troubling if not uncommon.

Ancient Egypt, however removed from its African historical roots, still looms in America's cultural consciousness, and has done so for over a century. As discussed earlier, in opposition to dominant readings of the ancient culture, ancient Egypt has come to function as a beacon of ancient African cultural glory for some of the millions of black Westerners who have found themselves forcibly removed from their own pasts. Womack remarks on this destruction, and the way Afrofuturism as a genre attempts to address the cultural lack through ancient Egypt, noting,

> The absence of Africa's contribution to global knowledge in history, science, and beyond is a gaping hole so expansive it almost feels like a missing organ in the planet's cultural anatomy. Can humanity ever know itself with this rigid segmentation of knowledge? Can ancient knowledge be recovered? Can trauma be erased? While the whys and hows that led to this void are etched in history, the obvious absence has compelled many Afrofuturists to look to the continent's myths, spirituality, and art on a never-ending quest for wholeness (80).

Her comments speak to a deliberate effort to imagine a history and a future that resists colonial efforts to diminish African power and accomplishment. Because Afrofuturism is a genre steeped in the fantastic, there is also a freedom to test the limits of time and space in addition to perceived cultural understandings of race and history. If a traumatic past cannot be erased, then the very nature of fantasy and science fiction media allows for it to be reimagined, and the iconography of ancient Egypt can and has assisted in the re-envisioning of Black power. Perhaps Afrofuturist artist D. Denenge Akpem says it best: "AfroFuturism is rooted in history and African cosmologies, using pieces of the past, technological and analog, to build the future. These works rethink and rework notions of identity; hybridity; the alien and states of alienation; belonging, immigration, migration; and the 'vessel,' both corporeal and metaphoric, symbolized as a vehicle for liberation" (Hazel).

Womack, like Word, has also linked ancient African cultures, including ancient Egypt, to feminism in Afrofuturism. Womack traces the prevalence in water mythology within Afrofuturism to the mythical Mami Wata, African water deities, to the ancient Egyptian language. She also notes similarities between Mami Wata imagery and imagery dedicated to the ancient Egyptian goddess, Isis. Womack argues that, "The Mami Wata are also closely associated with Africans brought to the New World in the transatlantic

slave trade," furthering the relationship between ancient Egypt, Afrofuturism, and feelings of alienation and displacement (87).

The political nature of a piece of media is often what establishes it as alternative or activist, though generally the media in question is nonfiction. However, to reiterate, the existing literature on alternative and activist media has allowed for narrative and artistic media to be included to varying degrees as alternative and activist productions. While genre fiction on the whole remains easily debatable as alternative and activist media, it is hopefully quite clear that Afrofuturist texts fit the bill.

Downing's proposed definition of alternative media quite directly states that minority and ethnic media, which Afrofuturism certainly is, are oftentimes positioned within alternative and radical media. Every scholar on the subject of Afrofuturism has established the importance that race has on the aesthetic—and it's evident that it is ultimately race that sets Afrofuturism apart from other more popular forms of science fiction and fantasy genre fiction. Because Afrofuturism deliberately draws on racial strife with the end goal of cultural critique, as Womack, Word, and Morris point out, and self-empowerment, as Hopkinson practices, it also fits perfectly with Atton's argument that alternative radical media allows for subaltern voices to be expressed and heard by other oppressed peoples.

Perhaps even more relevant is Lievrouw's work on culture jamming. While traditionally culture jamming refers to the cynical, critical likes of Adbusters and the Billboard Liberation Front, there is room for less satirical operations. Afrofuturism is a genre and aesthetic that relies on the reappropriation (and textual poaching) of signifiers

either originating with white-dominated media, such as the flashing lights and dials of the science fiction genre and the magic and whimsy of fantasy narratives, or of signifiers previously appropriated by white-dominated media from other places, such as the adoption of ancient Egyptian iconography in film, television, architecture, and fashion. Afrofuturism takes these images and reworks them from a marginalized perspective, presenting them back out into popular culture once more as a sort of subversive artistic remix.

As such, it's not entirely surprising that a good majority of Afrofuturism has manifested itself in music. As previously stated, the musical stylings of Sun Ra and George Clinton are often considered the beginnings of Afrofuturism, and the trend of science fiction and fantasy inspired black music has continued throughout the decades with Missy Elliot, Outkast, Janelle Monae, Azealia Banks, Nicki Minaj, and of course, FKA twigs. Eyerman and Jamison's analysis of pop music within social movements becomes especially useful here, particularly their observations regarding social movement pop music as potentially "utopian and premodern." Afrofuturism in all its formulations oftentimes attempts to create images of a future where black peoples are not living under the same racist conditions that exist today. Not all Afrofuturism shares this utopic angle, no, but the point is that the genre/movement/aesthetic allows for that variety of interpretation and imagination.

What all of the above discussion suggests, if not outright states, is that Afrofuturism is inherently, *incredibly* political, and that ancient Egypt's place within it is a political act in and of itself. The ancient Egyptian race controversy—the almost self-

explanatory title given to the debate surrounding the race of ancient Egypt—remains an oft-argued subject, particularly recently with the release of Ridley Scott's biblical epic, *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (Siame). While I have no desire to speak at length about the film, it's worth mentioning for the brouhaha that resulted from the casting of Christian Bale to play Moses, along with other white actors to play the rest of the main lead and supporting roles. Conversation and debate over the film sparked all over the internet, even reaching national news websites such as The Huffington Post, USAToday, and MSNBC (Alexander, Howard, Rosen).

What this conversations highlights is the fact that ancient Egypt still figures heavily in both Western popular culture as well as its understood cultural identity. This makes Afrofuturism's reclamation of ancient Egypt all the more powerful and relevant within the contemporary Western cultural context. As such, it becomes further evident that Afrofuturism is a genre and aesthetic driven by a deliberate desire to address issues of racial inequality, critique racist systems, recover glorious pasts, and present potential empowered futures. Hopkinson perhaps expresses this sentiment the most eloquently:

> I'm not going to try to predict the future of scholarship; science fiction and fantasy writing aren't about prediction. What they do instead is to interrogate the tools which humanity puts in place to manipulate its reality, whether those tools are simple or advanced technologies, or social systems such as laws and religions; in part science fiction and fantasy envision the directions in which we might be going. I believe it's important to make and claim space in that envisioning, space for the ways in which marginalized people experience the world and hope for the future. That envisioning needs to come from an understanding and knowledge of our pasts

CRITIQUES & FURTHER AREAS OF STUDY

Edward Said argues in *Orientalism*,

> Moreover, so authoritative a position did Orientalism have that I believe no one writing, thinking, or acting on the Orient could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and action imposed by Orientalism. In brief, because of Orientalism the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of though or action (3).

Which is to say, the Orient can never exist as a thing of its own. It is always coming through the filter of Orientalism; there is no pure version of that ambiguously located and poorly understood place. What this suggests, then, is that regardless of how empowering Afrocentric visions of ancient Egypt may be, the existence of said visions are not exempt from discussions of Orientalism or the negative effects Orientalism has on those who actually live in the Orient.

Scott Trafton has put forth a similar argument. To restate,

> black Orientalism [occupies] the spaces between European American imperialism and African American oppression, between white ambivalence and black identification, between interconnecting images of pharaohs, slaves, homeland, exodus, black Orientalism was structured by as many contradictions and overlapping valences as other branches of more general Orientalism (21).

Trafton is speaking of nineteenth century black Americans, but his critiques still hold their relevance, as there is still, of course, a certain contradiction inherent in upholding a culture through an oftentimes materialistic lens. For example, gold is a common element of Afrofuturist aesthetics for all the material wealth, and therefore success and power, it signifies. The copious amounts of gold which adorned Sun Ra and his Arkestra, or which adorns FKA twigs' hands and the outfits of her subjects in "Two Weeks," speaks to a level of materialism that perhaps overshadows other motivations. The reduction of

ancient Egypt to a handful of select symbols like gold, but also objects such pyramids, hieroglyphics, and King Tut's death mask, speaks to a certain cult worship of a culture devoid of people.

While debates may rage over the color of the ancient Egyptians' skin, an understanding of the lived experience of ancient Egyptians or Egyptian history overall is oftentimes completely overlooked. While this may be an inevitable consequence of applying the idea of a time long since gone to the people of a time currently taking place, as Afrocentrism and Afrofuturism aim in tandem to do, there is something to be said for the way in which Egyptians are erased from the conversation. This is especially true for the way modern Egyptians within Egypt as well as within the Egyptian diaspora feel the effects of such an oversight. To embrace *ancient* Egypt as a black space in the name of contemporary Western blackness is to disregard and deny that in many ways, contemporary Egypt remains a black space to this day. As such, the upholding of ancient Egypt as a triumph of black achievement for the empowerment of Black Westerners suggests, intentionally or unintentionally, that modern-day black Egyptians living natively and abroad cannot also participate in a history quite distinctly theirs as well. As of yet there has been no discussion of Egypt's own take on ancient Egypt in relation to their history and culture within Afrocentrist or Afrofuturist literature. This is in keeping with both Said and Trafton's critiques on Orientalism in the West—Orientalism tends to remove, diminish, or disempower the peoples who are located within the actual Orient.

Despite the oversight, the reality is that modern-day Egypt has a long history of negotiating its identity in relation to its more celebrated antiquity, a history which began

in the 1920s after the 1919 Egyptian revolution and subsequent state of independence from the British. Upon achieving independence, Egyptians set about establishing a new national identity, and one product of this effort was the moderately successful political movement known as Pharaonism. Pharaonism, which was spearheaded by Egyptian nationalist Taha Hussein, drew on the pre-Islamic culture of ancient Egypt as a way of establishing an indigenous ethnic and national identity that involved none of the groups who had previously controlled Egypt (Colla). Pharaonism obviously did not manifest itself in the same manner Afrocentrism has within Afrofuturism, but the sentiment behind creating media to support a community identity influenced by ancient Egypt merits some acknowledgement. If there's to be a conversation about the historical and cultural significance of ancient Egypt, then those still living in the region warrant participation.

Either of these critiques would benefit from a much more directed exploration of their contexts and consequences. Given the scope of this particular project, I cannot dedicate the space required to delve into the complexities of either issue. However, the scholarship is greatly lacking, and so future work in either area would be beneficial.

An exploration of the way Afrofuturism has drawn inspiration from contemporary Islamic practice may also prove fruitful. While the research encompassed by this project has left little room for the incorporation of religion, and in particular Islam, there is perhaps something to be gained from exploring any potential overlap between black sci-fi artists and black Muslims. There has been some work done on Islam and science fiction, with a website aptly entitled *Islam and Science Fiction* (Ahmed), but it's a topic largely devoid of academic thought.

Further analysis of ancient Egypt's role in crafting communities within the African diaspora would also be worthwhile. While Anderson's idea of the imagined community was not immediately related to the work done above, the idea is certainly relevant to Afrofuturism as a genre more broadly. Afrofuturism aims to create an imagined community among members of the black diaspora by both exploring metaphorically what it means to be a member of a diasporic group as well as creating a more universal history by reclaiming a visible and culturally significant piece of history previously claimed by white Westerners—ancient Egypt. In addition to Anderson's work on the deconstruction of community, Bakhtin's idea of the chronotope, as put into use by Paul Gilroy, could also be implemented into a discussion of Afrofuturism and the black Diaspora.

A CASE STUDY: FUNK WITCHES, FKA TWIGS, & "TWO WEEKS"

As established previously, Afrofuturism often manifests in the music industry, and primarily in hip hop, funk, and R&B music. Though these genres are often dominated by men, both within and without the Afrofuturism aesthetic, there are still a variety of black women who have participated throughout recent decades. Many of these women, particularly recently and perhaps understandably given earlier discussions of Afrofuturism and feminism, have produced musical sounds and stylings clearly influenced by Afrofuturism, whether the term has explicitly come into their artistic vocabulary or not.

Though one can find black female musical artists creating Afrofuturist texts from the eighties onwards, with artists such as Grace Jones, Missy Elliot, and the group TLC all participating to varying degrees, the current decade has seen a surge in Black female musical artists whose work is heavily inspired by science fiction and fantasy media, and whose music and music videos have been embraced by fellow Afrofuturist creators and scholars. Of special note are funk pop artist Janelle Monáe, hip hop artist Azealia Banks, and hip hop pop artist Nicki Minaj.

Figure 1: Janelle Monae in the music video for "PrimeTime."

Monáe has previously been the subject of some academic scholarship for her concept albums and music videos. Drawing on funk pop sensibilities that have earned her such esteemed fans as Prince, OutKast, and Erykah Badu, Monáe's powerhouse vocals, eclectic style, and elegant, modest, androgynous appearance (Monáe is known for her tendency to sport fitted tuxedos paired with makeup, highly styled hair, and nail polish) have launched her into a successful career; she has even become a spokesperson for the makeup company CoverGirl (Battan). In her creative work Monáe has re-envisioned herself as Cindi Mayweather, an android whose romantic and dance-tastic adventures are chronicled through Monáe's music/music videos. Videos for songs such as "PrimeTime" and "Electric Lady" directly present futuristic science-fiction themes, featuring advanced technologies, the android Cindi Mayweather—also in positions of power or respect—and other android women.

Figure 1: Azealia Banks in the music video for "Chasing Time."

Azealia Banks has similarly crafted a fantastic alter ego through her music and music videos. Known for her controversial comments and commitment to speaking her mind when it comes to issues of race, gender, and sexuality, Banks' public persona has in some ways overshadowed her musical skill. Banks' craft, however, has been consistently unique and complex, her lyrics often reflecting her attitudes. With her first mixtape, *FANTASEA*, Banks presented herself as a mermaid figure (an unintentional reference to the Mami Wata) in the album art, emphasized by the handful of songs on the album that dealt with nautical themes, such as "Neptune," "Aquababe," and "Atlantis." With her first official album release, *Broke with Expensive Taste*, Banks dropped the aquatic song titles, but has thus far released multiple videos for the album that heavily draw from science fiction narrative elements. Notably, her video for the song "Chasing Time" not only portrays Banks as some sort of magical space entity, but also directly references three

other black hip hop artists who have created Afrofuturist-esque texts, Missy Elliot, TLC, and Lil Kim.

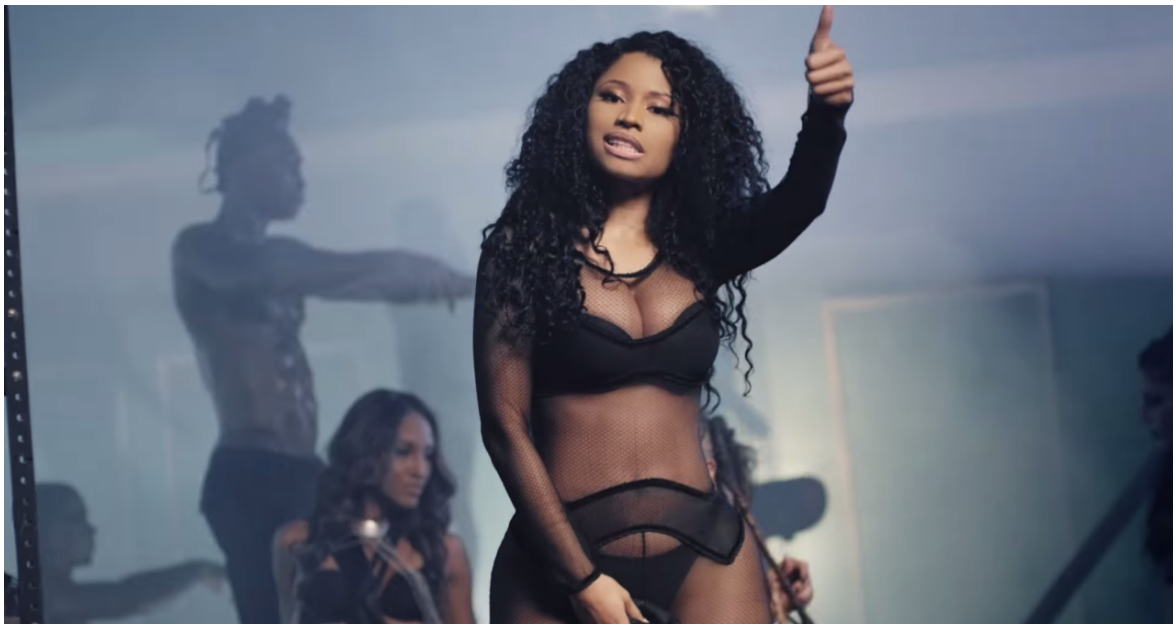

Figure 1: Nicki Minaj in the music video for "Only."

Nicki Minaj, while the least consistently Afrofuturist artist, has nonetheless explored fantastic themes in her work. A hip hop artist who hails from Trinidad, her music videos often depict Minaj in a variety of surrealist colorful settings, her features exaggerated through her makeup, costumes, and wigs to rather interesting degrees. Minaj's voice also fluctuates between exaggeration and understatement to mirror her physical appearance. Interestingly enough, it is one of the videos where Minaj looks the most conventional (for a rather sexual hip hop artist that is) that also feels the most Afrofuturistic. In the video for "Only," from Minaj's most recent album release, *The Pinkprint*, Minaj portrays an empowered gang leader in some dystopic concrete future

world where women seem to have a significant amount of power over the men. The video, in which Minaj poses for the camera or simply stands still, face sometimes shrouded by a veil or a mask, suggests that in this monochrome future, Minaj rules supreme, a sentiment often expressed within her entire music canon.

What all of these women have in common is a quality that Womack might argue stems directly from their participation in Afrofuturism.

> In Afrofuturism, black women's imagination, image, and voice are not framed by the pop expectations and sensibilities of the day. The black woman is not held to Middle America's norms, to the beauty ideals in the latest blogs. Nor is there some uniform expectation of blackness that she is called to maintain. Women develop theories, characters, art, and beauty free of the pressures of meeting male approval, societal standards, color-based taxonomies, or run-of-the-mill female expectations (101).

This is true of all the above women, whose work often defies expectations and stereotypes and consistently directly confronts those who are expecting those conventional images. Womack's comment is also applicable, of course, to the work of FKA twigs.

At 27, and with only one full album under her belt, FKA twigs has seen what might be considered a surprising amount of success given her unusual approach to music. Though it would seem twigs' esoteric sound and appearance are part of her appeal—her album, *LP1* has been featured on almost thirty best of 2014 lists, even taking the top spot in *Time* magazine ("Top 10 Best Albums."), and *Pitchfork* naming the record one of the best of the decade so far ("The 100 Best Albums of the Decade So Far.").

When popular critics discuss twigs, it is often to note her otherworldly appearance and performance style. An interview with Billboard magazine, for example, labeled twigs

a “Woman of Mystery” (Maloney); in an article published in The Huffington Post, Pricilla Frank asks, “Who is FKA Twigs *[sic]*?”and then proceeds to describe her as a goddess, a monster, a shapeshifter, and a chameleon; and in an article for Ebony.com, the suggestion is that, as a performer, FKA twigs is aloof and enigmatic, unconcerned with the desires of her audiences in favor of her own artistic process (Blair). twigs’ experimental music videos, oftentimes steeped in either a posthumanist futuristic tech version of herself or a primal, nature-based divine mother version, only contribute to her fairly bizarre public image. "Being beautiful isn't everything,” she asserts in one interview as a way of partly explaining the sometimes unsettling and disorienting nature of her videos. “Sometimes it's interesting to show how you feel on the inside on the outside, just through expressing yourself" (Maloney).

The consequence is that viewers are routinely forced to engage with the image of FKA twigs on her terms and her terms only. twigs’ unique public persona, bolstered by her unconventional music and avant garde music videos—which she also often directs—mark her as a unique and rich site of study for investigating the ways Afrofuturism, feminism, and ancient Egypt play out in popular culture, with her video for the single “Two Weeks” a combination of all three.

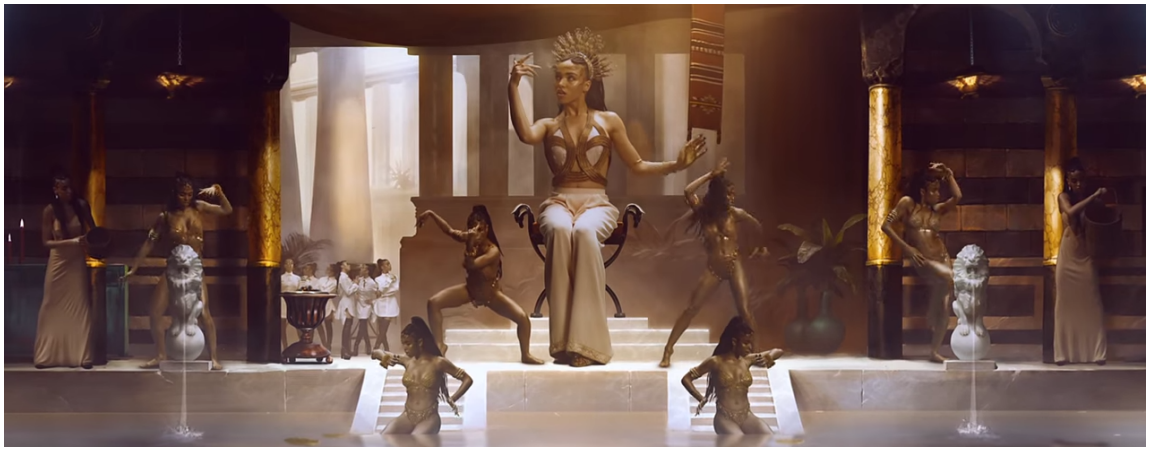

Figure 1: FKA twigs in the music video for “Two Weeks.”

In the video, FKA twigs sits upon an elegantly simple throne dressed in embroidered cream linens, a golden crown atop her head, jewels adorning her hands, and her palms painted gold. She is surrounded by a “harem” of identical (though with differing wardrobes), miniaturized, subjects who either stand in the background observing, pour water into a large pool, or dance provocatively at Twigs’ feet. Eventually, a fifth version of twigs is exposed, this one as large as the first, but submerged fully within the depths of the pool. Dressed in a long-sleeved, long-skirted red fishnet dress, this incarnation of twigs gently undulates underwater while bathed in the cascading light from the temple above. The camera pans out and down from a medium shot to a wide shot slowly, so the full scene is only revealed little by little (a trope of twigs’ videos). As the complete picture is languorously unveiled, twigs sings a song dripping with sexual desire, her breathy vocals dancing over the lyrics that explicitly detail the things she’d like to do with the anonymous partner the song speaks to.

Admittedly, little about the video explicitly references ancient Egypt. The temple where twigs' goddess version of herself sits is more ambiguously African than anything else, with tall, thick stone columns and a flag with a brown and red African pattern on it hanging from the ceiling. Oriental lanterns dimly light the scene, and marble lion fountains pour water into a deep pool. Despite the indistinct quality of the representation, many critics understood twigs to be representing an Egyptian deity. Ian Blair of *Ebony* commented that, in the video, twigs sits "atop an Egyptian throne in all her regality"; Thomas Gorton from *Dazed* insisted that, "'Two Weeks' features twigs as an ancient Egyptian goddess from the near future"; and in a BuzzFeed interview with the video's director, Nabil Elderkin, Reggie Ugwu noted the similarities between the music video and the 2002 vampire film, *Queen of the Damned*, in which R&B singer Aaliyah depicts an ancient Egyptian vampire queen.

The associations are not unwarranted if the comments made by the creators of the video are anything to go by. When Elderkin was asked by Ugwu about the *Queen of the Damned* feel of the "Two Weeks" video, which Ugwu also compared to Michael Jackson's music video for "Remember the Time" (starring Eddie Murphy and the supermodel, Iman) and Kanye West's short music video for the song "Power," both of which feature ancient Egyptian iconography as inherently tied to Blackness, he responded,

> Ha! Hell yeah. I'm not mad at that. Really it was just this idea that I'd wanted to do for a long time that would be like a moving painting with one shot. The backdrop is an actual painting by twigs' friend Ignasi. We worked for like two weeks just to get the painting right that would depict this harem world that I wanted. The idea was that she was a queen, but that it's shown in an abstract way

> and all within herself. It's kind of like [video collage artist] Marco Brambilla meets *300* meets hopefully a little bit of myself.

Digital artist Ignasi, who created the idyllic backdrop for the video, spoke of the project in a similar way. Of the video, Ignasi says, "It's sort of like this feel of a really antique painting of a Moroccan harem" (Gorton). While the repeated use of the word "harem" in this context is problematic—depictions of "harems" in Western art are often associated with Orientalist renderings of the Middle East, a critique easily tied to the ones provided earlier in this piece—Elderkin's and Ignasi's comments are valuable for the way they position the "Two Weeks" video firmly in ancient North Africa and Egypt.

To what end, then, is ancient Egypt utilized in twigs' video? What thematic messages are conveyed as a result of its aesthetic inclusion and connection to a Black artist like twigs? Given the argument established in the previous pages about the empowering value of alternative images of ancient Egypt and its formative influence on Afrofuturism, it is not difficult to read "Two Weeks" from such a perspective.

In an interview for *The Guardian*, FKA twigs herself speaks on one of her aims with the video.

> I write exactly what I think. Weird things can be sexy…Vulnerability is the strongest state to be in. How boring would it be if we were constantly dominant or constantly submissive? In the video, it's this vision of me feeding myself, milking myself. I was naked, painted in gold, doing krump [a style of African American street dancing] dance moves. It's bizarre, but hot in a very weird way (Beaumont-Thomas).

In the video, there are certainly multiple varieties of FKA twigs at play, both dominant with the supreme versions of twigs (the goddess on the throne above ground and the goddess drifting underwater) and submissive with the smaller versions of the musician

dancing for the goddess on the throne and pouring water into the pool for the goddess below the water's surface.

The fact that only the Egyptian goddess on the throne is able to sing—and by extension to speak—suggests she is the prime focus and the incarnation of twigs with the most power. To return briefly to Chris Atton's work on alternative and radical media, Atton argues that one of the values of alternative media is that it allows those in subaltern positions whose voices have been silenced by mainstream media spaces to a create a space of their own where their voices can be heard. twigs' ancient African goddess does just this.

twigs' goddess figure also taps into a popular Afrofuturist archetype. "Afrofuturism is a home for the divine feminine principle," argues Womack, "a mother Earth ideal that values nature, creativity, receptivity, mysticism, intuition, and healing as partners to technology, science, and achievement." She goes on to say that this appreciation for the divine feminine is "one way that Afrofuturism differs from sci-fi and the futurist movements in the past" (103). FKA twigs is presented as a divine feminine spirit in multiple ways throughout "Two Weeks," particularly in the often-referenced moment when the goddess begins pouring milk from her fingertips directly into the mouth of one of her dancing disciples.

It is an intimate and almost uncomfortable moment to witness twigs "milking" herself given the many meanings that milk as an object has come to have in Western culture. The act plays on all of these connotations, and is at once understood as erotic, motherly, and divine. At the center of all these readings is of course FKA twigs, who is

seen as both creator and receiver of all these celestial gifts. That twigs is depicted as an ancient Egyptian goddess in this moment is significant. Consider again Tanekeya Word's belief that Afrofuturist feminism "works on a continuum of past, present, future and must utilize the Sankofa principle of 'it is not wrong for one to go back and take that which they have forgotten' or 'simply go back and take.'" By donning an ancient Egyptian persona, twigs does indeed "simply go back and take," adopting an empowering image of blackness by using an ancient queen as a mouthpiece for her thoughts on female sexuality and independence. The fact that the video appears more vaguely African than ancient Egyptian, and yet is intended and read as ancient Egyptian, furthers the association between the two concepts/places/cultures,

There is also the second goddess to consider. Suspended in water, this incarnation of twigs brings the Mami Wata discussed by Womack to mind. African water deities, the Mami Wata are thought to be inspired by ancient Egyptian mythology, particularly the key goddess, Isis. While it's unknown whether FKA twigs, Ignasi, or Elderkin intentionally meant to reference these spirits, this underwater version of Twigs still holds a venerated position in the video. Devotees pour water out of jugs into the deep pool that houses the goddess, and viewers of the video watch as the camera pans down below the surface of the water to see this goddess seemingly revel in the heavenly light filtering down through the pool. Her lips part as she moves sensually through the water while twigs' breathes out the final lyrics of the song: "Mouth open, you're high."

CONCLUSION

According to Priscilla Frank, "twigs speaks to a new generation of people, of artists, of women, for whom identity operates differently." Her work, while currently experiencing both critical and popular acclaim, transcends many of the boundaries of popular music, as well as the home genres of hip hop and R&B that her work is often placed in.

Much of what makes FKA twigs unique is the varied and unusual presentations of herself put forth through her musical albums and the accompanying music videos. Her commitment to exploring how technology can be manipulated and used to manipulate her own image pair with divine feminine sensibilities to craft an artistic vision that presents both deep contradictions and universal truths. Frank believes this contrary quality is also one of the reasons for twigs' success:

> twigs speaks to an age where musical genres are like ingredients best thoroughly mixed and baked. Where human interactions are so heavily mediated, a quest for authentic human connection is not only futile, it's boring. twigs speaks to those whose lies are as important as their truths, especially those who can mix the two to create art.

Afrofuturism proves a rich playground for exploring such contradictions. Its ability to remix and re-navigate time, space, history, race, and gender allow for a freedom of artistic thought and expression not easily afforded to more conventional mediated spaces and genres. This freedom is also what lends Afrofuturism, particularly Afrofuturism imbued with a feminist framework, its potential for radical and resistant creation.

This report has argued that Afrofuturism is more than simply Black science-fiction and fantasy, but rather that it is Black science fiction and fantasy heavily framed by political awareness and a desire to inspire future Black empowerment and excellence, particularly by introducing past historical Black cultural glories, as ancient Egypt is seen to be. Though there are flaws to this utilization of Egypt, the aims of Afrofuturism exceed it weak points, and the fruits of the theoretical labors made by Afrofuturism and Afrofuture feminism can be seen in the cultural products of many Black female musical artists, and of course by FKA twigs.

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